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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to help funders avoid some of the pitfalls of embarking on major reform efforts in troubled urban districts, proposing exploratory case studies as a tool to improve philanthropic giving. The paper explains what is behind the two major flaws of philanthropic investment (not knowing how one thinks schools will improve and not knowing who one is working with). It also describes exploratory case study methodology, focusing on the analysis, criteria for judging a theory of change, and due diligence regarding investing in the reform of urban school systems. Two examples of this methodology in action are presented. The San Diego, California case focuses on intensive professional development in a centralized reform. The Denver, Colorado case examines how an over-reaching board threatens fragile reform. For each example, the paper notes how funders can use the information. The paper concludes by describing several advantages of the exploratory case study method, including its accessibility, that it contains rich information, can point out gaps in strategies and build contacts, and that it allows the reader to see the whole picture. Three appendices contain exploratory case study methods, exploratory case study of San Diego, and other areas for funders to investigate. (SM)

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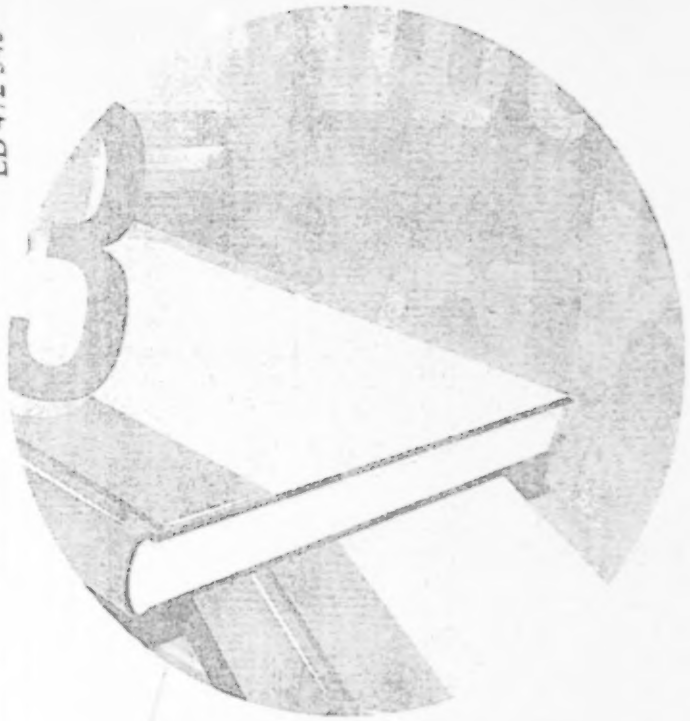

PHILANTHROPIC DUE DILIGENCE

Exploratory Case Studies to Improve Investments in Urban Schools

Christine Campbell
with James Harvey and Michael DeArmond

UD 035 324

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August 2002

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION p. 5

PART I: TWO MAJOR PITFALLS: Reasons for the Failure of Philanthropic Investment in Education p. 7

Not knowing how you think schools will improve
Not knowing who you are working with

PART II: THE EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY p. 9

The analysis
One criteria for judging a theory of change
Due diligence regarding investing in the reform of urban school systems

PART III: TWO EXAMPLES: How the exploratory case study is useful p.13

San Diego - Intensive professional development in a centralized reform
Denver - Over-reaching board threatens fragile reform

CONCLUSION p. 21

APPENDICES p. 23

Appendix A: Exploratory case study methods
Appendix B: Exploratory case study of San Diego
Appendix C: Other areas for funders to investigate

Introduction

Many foundations have put funds into urban school reform. It seems clear that philanthropies are now re-assessing their strategies, looking under the hood and kicking the tires before they invest, and even demanding changes in governance and management as a condition to grantmaking. This paper proposes "Exploratory Case Studies" as a tool to improve philanthropic giving. It suggests that case studies can help funders target resources on districts with the greatest need while finding a better fit with beneficiary districts.

Since ***A Nation at Risk*** warned in 1983 of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in American public and private schools, foundations have invested record amounts in public education. Once primarily interested in colleges and universities, philanthropists have turned increasingly to K-12 schools, more than doubling the proportion of their funds spent in supporting K-12 education, according to several accounts.[1] By 2000, it was estimated that philanthropic giving for K-12 education totaled $1.4 billion, of which 25% was directed at education reform.[2]

Although looming large as a proportion of philanthropic giving, foundation support for K-12 schools is a relatively small part of school budgets. In 1997-98, private giving to public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, including gifts and "tuition and fees from patrons," amounted to just 2.6% of school revenues, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.[3]

Shrewdly invested, philanthropic support of urban schools can accomplish a lot. Like a tiny rudder turning a large vessel, comparatively small amounts of foundation money can leverage major movement. Foundation efforts get a lot of attention and create substantial pressure locally. Community leaders disregard these dynamics at some cost. Foundations also typically bring a considerable arsenal of expertise to the table. Most school districts are eager to draw on this resource. And, of course, the critical importance of improving urban schools, enrolling nearly one-quarter of all students, cannot be overlooked if the nation's larger school-reform agenda is to be achieved. Everyone from the school superintendent to the foundation president is eager to do something about the gap between the nation's educational "haves" and "have-nots."

Yet there are increasing signs that foundations are not entirely happy with the results of their investments to date. A number of straws in the wind indicate that philanthropies seek better-focused and more strategic use of their funds and are even prepared to demand significant improvements in governance and school management before investing.

For example, the high hopes of the Casey Foundation's "New Futures" effort were hardly met. This was an ambitious multi-year program launched in the late 1980s to revitalize communities and schools simultaneously in some half-a-dozen cities. It concluded with some cautionary lessons for grantmakers about the amount of time required to effect real change. Part of the challenge, clearly, was the difficulty of getting all the actors in schools, community agencies, and health care facilities on the same page at the same time.[4] Also early in the 1980s, the Pew Charitable Trusts abandoned its "Children's Initiative" after concluding that $60 million over ten years was unlikely to make much progress in improving fragmented efforts in education, health, and social outcomes for children.[5] Like the Casey effort, the challenge of achieving Pew's objectives looked insurmountable given the time and resources devoted to the task.

1. See for example, Meg Sommerfeld, "Education Philanthropy has Spiraled since Risk Report," **Education Week**, November 3, 1993, and Catherine Gewertz, "Nearly a Quarter of Foundation Giving Goes to Education," **Education Week**, March 21, 2001.
2. "Foundations' K-12 Grants Grow; 'More Competitive' Climate Ahead," **Education Week**, Mary Ann Zehr, March 6, 2002.
3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, **Digest of Education Statistics**, 2000, NCES 2001-034, Table 159, page 176.
4. "The Path Of Most Resistance: Reflections On Lessons Learned From New Futures," The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995.
5. Deborah L. Cohen, "Demise of Pew Project Offers Lessons to Funders," **Education Week**, June 1, 1994.

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Efforts devoted exclusively to schools also appear to have fallen short. That, at least, was the conclusion of an analysis earlier this year of the Annenberg Challenge. The "Challenge" was financed by billionaire Walter Annenberg's $1.1 billion gift to some of the nation's most beleaguered schools. The analysis concluded that the "Challenge" had helped improve academic performance, but had not created the kind of dramatic system improvement sought when Annenberg launched the program in 1993.[6] Annenberg officials acknowledged that they had underestimated what would be required to bring gains to scale. Within weeks of the release of that report, three Pittsburgh foundations (the Heinz Endowment and the Grable and Pittsburgh foundations) flexed their muscles in announcing a joint decision to suspend $3 million awarded to the Pittsburgh public schools. The foundations cited poor fiscal management and a breakdown in governance between the board and the superintendent as precipitating factors in this unusual decision.[7]

The reasons behind these disappointments are many and varied. Large among them loom the intractability of the problems children and schools face in many troubled communities. Yet the need to persevere in these efforts is transparently clear. Literacy, civic empowerment, and economic productivity all depend on effectively functioning public schools.

Achieving those important social goals will require funders to become more strategic in their school investments. This paper suggests that foundation giving needs to be backed up by a clear theory of change and that foundation officials need to know whether the districts in which they plan to work or are already working match the foundation's interests. In short, foundation officials need to focus on how they think schools will improve and they should not hesitate to look under the hood and kick the district's tires before taking a test drive. "Exploratory Case Studies" with prospective district partners represent one way to proceed. Like "due diligence" in the private sector, exploratory case studies can help foundations understand whether they are about to enter a good match and, equally important, remind both foundation and district officials that effective grantmaking must tie funding to a theory of change.

Purpose of this Paper

This paper will help funders avoid some of the pitfalls of embarking on major reform initiatives in troubled urban districts. The paper has three parts:

- An explanation of what is behind the two big flaws of philanthropic investment;
- A description of a tool developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education that foundations can use to avoid these pitfalls: the Exploratory Case Study Method; and
- Two examples of the method in action and how funders could use it.

6. Michael A. Fletcher, "Big Gift to Schools Brings Small Gains: Study Says $1.1 Billion Donation Could Not Overcome Serious Problems," **Washington Post**, June 12, 2002.
7. Stephanie Strom, "Private Groups in Pittsburgh Halt Millions in School Aid," **New York Times**, July 16, 2002

PART I: TWO MAJOR PITFALLS:

Reasons for the Failure of Philanthropic Investment in Education

Well intentioned but unsuccessful efforts to improve urban school systems abound. For one, foundations are eager to get involved but are not always clear about how they believe their investments will lead to improvements in schools. Additionally, foundations have also relied on some fairly static methods for choosing their investments such as RFPs, or a few visits with district leaders, which might miss some of the larger issues that promote or prevent systemic reform. The sections that follow detail these pitfalls.

1. Not knowing how you think schools will improve (or – What is your theory of change?)

Education is a complex field. There are endless potential areas of investment—individual children and schools, teacher training, after-school activities, facilities, specific subject curriculum, entire district reform, the list goes on. The Center on Reinventing Public Education, through many years of research, has concluded that in order for urban schools to improve, foundations must invest in whole systems change, or whole district reforms, rather than new projects or particular schools. To create high performance school systems, funders must avoid the tendency to "projectitis" or funding add-ons rather than getting at the thorny issue of improving the whole district.

Because systemic reform is so important, and because more foundations are focusing significant resources in the this direction, this paper assumes that funders are interested in funding major systems changes and that they are first trying to channel their resources directly into the school district. It may be that the district is not the right place to invest. Perhaps an outside, independent collaborative or local education fund may be a better fit. However, since so much investment has gone into districts, this paper will assume that foundations are investigating first in the appropriateness of the district.

Foundations must understand their goals and develop a theory of change as a means to accomplishing those goals. Many philanthropists can have a definite idea of what their goals are (e.g. raising the test scores of low income and minority children) but have no idea how to attain them. They do not know how they think change will happen, and therefore are unable to choose the best method or investment that is right for them. They cannot assess whether a district is a good fit and whether the district's planned actions will lead to improved learning. To develop a theory of change, a funder must be able to answer the question: How do you think schools (and school systems) can change?[8] Funders need to conduct research and discuss their opinions throughout their own organization to come to a coherent theory of change.[9]

Once a theory has been developed, more work needs to be done. How will the funder know if their investment is having an impact? What measures will satisfy them that they are successful? These are difficult questions to ask and answer, but doing so before investing is crucial. Part III of this paper explores the question of theory of change in greater detail and offers a tool to evaluate whether a theory of change is complete.

2. Not knowing who you are working with (or – Is this really a good match?)

Once the funder has developed a coherent theory of change, it needs to evaluate its potential investments. This means learning about the district and its community, its motives and capabilities.

Funders may not know enough of the right information about the applicants.

Though every foundation has its granting guidelines, many funders do not know what to look for in districts in order to take an educated risk in investment. Funders who are considering significant urban district reforms must know about the history and potential of the district they are thinking of working with. They must ask:

8. For a comprehensive look at how to develop a plausible reform proposal, see Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth Celio, **Fixing Urban Schools**, Brookings Press, 1998.
9. Several foundations have worked hard to develop and test their theories of change, including the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Carnegie Corporation.

What makes this district promising? How have other reform efforts fared? Are its leadership and strategic plan solid? What are the district's problems and are they really willing to solve them? Are they capable of solving them? What are the union and community dynamics?

Applicants know how to ask for money, but do not always know how to reform.
Districts are hungry for money, especially the flexible funding that comes from grants, but they often do not know how to implement lasting change. Some districts have become masterful at writing polished grants that look promising to funders. But once the money arrives, the district is unable to make the promised changes. Knowing more about the district, especially its top leaders, is a good start. Finding out about its funding base and success with other grants is even better. What is their view of strategic use of grant funds in leveraging a larger agenda and reforms? A frank conversation with the superintendent about how serious the district is about its proposed plans could reveal whether there is much behind the well-written application.

There are pressures on both sides to aim big.
With so much money being channeled into education, funders feel the pressure to announce grand plans to turn around a troubled district, setting their foundation apart from the others and making headlines. Responding to this need, school districts feel the pressure to promise big in return, almost assuredly unable to deliver. This mutual hopefulness makes for a jaded response by school district staff, parents and the general public to the proposals. While funders want to be distinctive, they owe it to themselves to be realistic. They might just get a realistic applicant and a modest but successful outcome.

Political pressures can result in poor choices.
Funders often find that even if they have some sense of what will make a good applicant, they are politically pressured (or required by their charter) to choose a local district as one of their recipients even if this district may not be a good candidate. Proximity to the funder is no guarantee for success. If a foundation can't escape this, and the district is not a strong candidate, some extra effort on the foundation's part to work with the district might help improve the planned reform strategy. Pairing with a strong local education fund can help the foundation press for change and improve the chances of the initiative. Or, the foundation can give the district a comparatively smaller gift, with the hope that it can later be overshadowed by the success of other, better choices.

The very act of becoming aware of these two prominent pitfalls of self-examination and the need for better information about grantees is helpful in and of itself. Philanthropies can spend time reflecting on how they plan for and make gifts, and strategize ways to avoid these pitfalls. This paper, however, will take the topic further by suggesting a method that would solve both the issue of self-examination and investigation of the potential recipient. The method is the Exploratory Case Study.

PART II: THE EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY

Foundations need to look carefully at districts to decide if, at least on the surface, it is a promising site for investment. But foundations also need to assess them analytically, with a particular point of view – whether they fit the funder's theory of change. How would this work? The Center on Reinventing Public Education has developed an analysis and a method that can get at both pitfalls.

1. The Analysis

Start with the theory of change. Funders need to begin by avoiding flaw one – not knowing how they think schools will change – by settling on a theory of change. This belief can take many forms. It may be rooted in the personal experience of a philanthropist and grow from there. Or it may come out of compelling research. It could be a combination of both. There are many possible theories of change.

For example, the funder could believe that:

- More and better training of teachers and principals will lead to improvements in the classroom.
- Clear expectations for learning—through standards and accountability—will make clear what children need to learn, will be the impetus for new tests that measure this and that this will lead to consequences for schools, students and teachers.
- Leadership through the school board, superintendent, principals and community will guide teachers to better teaching and students to improved learning.
- Decentralization will give schools greater opportunity to make decisions in hiring, curriculum and problem-solving which will bring about greater student learning.
- Charter schools will allow for innovation, that choice will make for better working conditions for teachers and more tailored learning experiences for children and that this will lead to success in the classroom.[10]

Once a theory rises to the top, it should be scrutinized for "zones of wishful thinking."[11] That is, elements of the theory that the reform needs but cannot cause, and how likely these things are to happen. For example, if the belief is that through more and better training teachers will be able to improve student learning, it assumes that, among other things, schools will have the freedom to select and make use of the new training, and that teachers will all want to improve their craft and try new things. These actions are out of the control of the funder. If the reform is to work, incentives to make these other issues happen will also need to be attended to.

Because reform strategies abound, researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education have created criteria for judging the completeness of a reform strategy, which has proven useful for funders and districts alike.

2. One Criteria for Judging a Theory of Change - *Incentives, Increased School Capabilities, And Freedom Of Action: Three Essential Elements*

Paul Hill and researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education have developed a method of thinking about how to develop or assess reform proposals. This method suggests that every system-wide reform strategy must have three strong and interdependent elements:

(1) ***incentives for school performance***,

(2) ***ways of increasing school capabilities***, and

(3) ***freedom of action for school staff to change how they serve students***.

10. For a more in-depth discussion of reform theories, see Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth Celio, **Fixing Urban Schools**, Brookings Press, 1998.
11. Hill, Paul T. and Mary Beth Celio, **Fixing Urban Schools**, Brookings Press, 1998, p.17.

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This trio can help to judge whether any theory of change is logically complete – essentially, it is a way of understanding what any reform proposal addresses or lacks. Most reform initiatives are meant to change what happens in schools. The presumption is that something desirable is not happening now. The question is: why is it not happening? The answer could be one (or a combination) of the following:

- People now have no incentive to act in the desired way;
- They lack the requisite capacity (knowledge, skill, equipment, etc.) to act in the desired way; or
- They are prevented by laws or regulations from acting in the desired way.

Any proposed action ought to specify whether it is acting on incentives, capacity, or freedom of action; and if it is not acting on one of those elements, be able to explain why the current strategy has already sufficiently addressed it.

An illustration of how this works follows. Few districts have a strategy that balances incentives, investments in school capacity, and school-level freedom of action. This may be because leaders start with methods or approaches with which they have experience and avoid those that are the most difficult for that district. In Boston, Superintendent Tom Payzant, a long time educator, has focused on investing in his staff. In Seattle, the late Superintendent John Stanford, a former Army general, looked for unit leadership from principals and used his outsider's perspective as an exhortation to shake things up. Former San Antonio Superintendent Diana Lam brought in school designs that she had experience with in the past. In addition, people also start with what is possible, and avoid what is difficult or what might put a stop to all progress. Effective reform efforts, however, require stepping beyond these comfort zones.

These three elements are difficult to put in place, but essential for a reform's success. As explained in our recent book, *It Takes A City*, (Brookings Press, 2000.):

> ***Incentives promote performance.*** A strategy that includes incentives rewards schools in which students learn, and it does not tolerate situations in which children are not learning.
>
> ***Increasing school capabilities enhances the school's capacity to handle the intervention.*** Strategies that include capability enhancement invest in new ideas, new methods of instruction, teacher training, and recruitment of new teachers. Schools get help devising improvement plans and assessing their progress. Schools fill teacher vacancies with the best available people, not just those who are on the top of the civil service transfer list.
>
> ***A strategy that increases school freedom opportunities allows initiative and entrepreneurship to blossom.*** School leaders and teachers, relieved of rules that limit and routinize instruction, are free to use staff and money in new and innovative ways.

Incentives highlight the importance of performance; investing in capacity building raises new abilities; and freedom removes the excuses for failing to strive for high standards. But just as all three are essential, they must also work together. Each buttresses and reinforces the others. A strategy that employs incentives, but gives schools no freedom of action puts schools in a position where they cannot reasonably be held accountable for change. A strategy that gives schools freedom but does not invest in building capacity sets up expectations for change, but provides no means to meet them. And a strategy that employs incentives and builds school capacity but does not provide freedom of action forces schools to either find ways around the rules or rationalize inaction by blaming

12. Hill, Paul T., Christine Campbell and James Harvey. **It Takes A City**. Brookings Press, 2000, p. 24.

the constraints. Policymakers, philanthropies and community organizations who hope to reform schools by backing one or two of these features but not all three will find themselves backing another weakened initiative."[12]

3. Due Diligence Regarding Investing in the Reform of Urban School Systems: Using the analysis in a case study

Beginning in 1997, the Center on Reinventing Public Education began to look closely at half a dozen large urban districts to learn as much as possible about where they had come from, what state and local pressures affected them and the reform strategies being employed by the superintendent and board. The facts were analyzed to understand the plausibility of the reforms and whether they might lead to hoped-for outcomes. These case studies have informed our research into urban school reform in general, and has added to our understanding of what moves some reforms forward and what causes others to collapse. Researchers at the Center created a template that has been helpful in researching these districts and have shared it with several foundations as they attempt to do the same either before or after investing. What follows is an explanation of what these Exploratory Case Studies look like. The next section shows how one foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, used them to inform their investments.

Purpose Of Using Exploratory Case Studies

Exploratory case studies – short, descriptive reports detailing a district's history, decision-making, and implementation using the theory of change analysis explained above – are an important tool for two basic uses:

1) to judge whether a district's proposal is well-founded enough to merit funding; and

2) to assess the needs of a district so that a foundation interested in working with it can target its own initiatives.

Exploratory case studies also provide an in-depth analysis that few people involved in the activity have the perspective to create for themselves. For that reason, they can be a learning device, giving those involved a chance to reflect on the strengths and challenges of the district that could improve the success of their efforts.

In addition to the narrative, case studies produce useful data that helps both those inside the reform and those outside who wish to assist, by looking at all the factors that might be affecting, hindering or ought to be employed to bring about progress. The data can include:

- a profile of existing schools in the area (public and private),
- school attendance patterns,
- non-school educational assets (day care and job training centers, libraries, churches),
- groups organized to promote educational improvement,
- community demographics (family structure, income and education level),
- information on leadership (stability and capacity) at the city, district and school level,
- information about resources (fiscal, infrastructure.)

All of these areas can help to diagnose what the areas of strength and need are.

Case studies are best conducted by a consultant or researcher from an outside organization. Foundation staff could conduct the research, but they would need to be aware of conflicts their presence as potential funders might bring. Outside research organizations are familiar with this kind of research, have the staff to do it and can research and collect the data in a timely and neutral manner, with fairness and credibility.

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For more detail on how to research and write an Exploratory Case Study, see Appendix A: Exploratory Case Study Methods.

Taken together, the theory of change analysis and the case study and can give a funder a view of what the district is doing in the context of the funder's ideas about how things get done. It avoids both pitfalls at the same time.

But what exactly does a case study look like and how would it help a funder? This next section draws from two real case studies and illustrates how these concepts apply.

PART III: TWO EXAMPLES

How the Exploratory Case Study is Useful

1. Two Examples: How the Exploratory Case Study Is Useful

The Annie E. Casey Foundation embarked on a new initiative to improve the lives of disadvantaged children through its Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development (NT/FD) initiative in 1999. It is based on the simple premise that children do well when their families do well and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. The first component of the Foundation's NT/FD strategy is called Making Connections, an initiative to demonstrate how a broad cross section of constituencies can be mobilized in 22 cities to improve the odds for families in tough neighborhoods by helping families make connections to economic opportunities, social networks, and effective public services. In order for fieldworkers and program staff alike to understand the complex issues under debate and make sense of the local situation in one of those areas—education—and to determine whether and how the foundation would invest in that city's education improvement agenda, the foundation chose Exploratory Case Studies as one of their first methods to collect information and make sense of what was going on. They believed that the theory of change analysis highlighted in this paper - a balance of incentives, capacity and freedom of action – would help them analyze and understand what was happening in each district.

The Foundation's education investments support community-based and system-wide efforts to create responsive and effective schools – schools that strengthen families and neighborhoods by preparing young people for success in the worlds of work, family, and citizenship. With that in mind, they sought case studies of four cities' school districts as examples of what program staff ought to be looking for in all of the cities. The four cities included Boston, Denver, Oakland and San Diego. Included in Appendix B is an example of a full case study of San Diego, complete with information on all the issues mentioned in the previous section (history of the city's reform efforts, performance data, information on the superintendent, etc.)

What follows below are selected elements of that San Diego case and similar elements of the Denver case; both include examples of what a funder might do with this information. The San Diego case illustrates what a funder might do with a district that has invested in a deep but incomplete reform. The Denver case highlights a district experiencing upheaval, requiring the foundation to assess whether the time was right to get involved. Both abridged cases illustrate the two basic uses of an Exploratory Case Study: they provided the foundation a chance to judge whether these two districts' strategies and future plans matched their theory of change, and whether and how to fund them.

San Diego—Intensive Professional Development in a Centralized Reform[13]

For years, San Diego's preferred self-image was that of a small coastal town, a place far removed from the hubbub of its famous neighbor to the north. The truth in this image – that San Diego is no Los Angeles – does not erase the fact that in recent decades San Diego has seen its share of "big city" problems. Gang violence and crime grew in the late 1980s; the city's economy fell into a recession in the 1990s when the federal government closed local military bases. Add immigration, poverty, income inequality and San Diego's "coastal town" begins to look more and more like a big city. Not surprisingly, its schools have increasingly faced big-city challenges too. For years they have struggled with a significantly high achievement gap between poor and minority students and wealthy white students.[14]

In 1998, the San Diego school board was in the market for a new superintendent. With the business community and local civic elites pushing for change, the Board of Education initiated a nationwide search for its new superintendent, courting candidates who had backgrounds outside of education. In the end, the board chose the local U.S. Attorney, Alan Bersin, to run the billion-dollar

13. This case study was written in 2001. The facts and conclusions drawn were made at that time and may not be applicable today.
14. "San Diego fights gap in learning", **San Diego Union Tribune**, Maureen Magee, March 8, 1999.

school district. He, in turn, recruited a nationally acclaimed Chancellor of Instruction to head the instructional side of his team. Together they instituted a massive reform of San Diego's school district—a top-down reform with a relentless focus on literacy and big investments in professional development for teachers, while cutting out peripheral programs and reducing central office staff.

Not surprisingly, these reforms have been viewed as smart and necessary by some, and arrogant and shortsighted by others. Three years into the reforms, researchers at the University of San Diego found that important gains were taking place, especially in literacy, the focus of much of San Diego's investments.[15] They found that substantial numbers of students in grades K-4 moved from "below grade level" to an "at or above grade level" standard of performance in literacy, with the largest gains coming in first grade, where the district had focused most of its attention. Intriguingly, the students making the greatest gains were those for whom English was a second language. Though there were few improvements in high school scores, the elementary and middle school scores were promising.[16]

The question remains whether this unusual leadership arrangement and bold strategy will translate into sustained improvement in the educational outcomes for San Diego's children, especially those who are poor and minority. And whether it will remain stable enough to pursue and sustain change over the long haul.

Analysis of the reforms via balance of incentives, capacity and freedom of action

Incentives and Consequences to Change

In education, incentives and consequences are the carrots or sticks that induce action. Districts often avoid either. Few places devise incentives beyond financial rewards (which are both expensive and not proven to inspire people to change), which are, therefore, unattractive to cash-strapped districts. Few also employ punitive consequences because they are painful to enforce, and politically risky for the few who do.

In San Diego, incentives have tended to take the form of informal pressure for personal and professional improvement. Teachers are encouraged (but not required) to attend workshops to improve their craft and effectiveness in using the district's new mandated programs. Teachers can also apply to be instructional coaches or principals – the reward is to be accepted into these limited, honored positions. The Blueprint, the district's written plan for reform, mentions a Performance Reward Program to identify and reward schools that demonstrate significant gains in student achievement at each school level but the reward program's status is unclear.[17] The lack of rewards for hard work and accomplishment, and to encourage people to change, are glaringly clear to teachers especially, and is one reason morale is at an all time low in the district. The reforms are difficult, demanding and relentless and many teachers are worn out and angry.

While there are few positive incentives, there are also no consequences attached to poor performance. At the district level, the Focus schools (eight schools that were chronic poor performers) are under watch, but to date there is no clarity about how many years they will be allowed to continue if they fail to improve. The district might be relying on the state to enforce consequences, but the state is also not clear about what it will do with schools that receive the state improvement funds but do not improve.

Capacity Building Measures

Capacity building can mean investing in people's skills or supplying them with the tools they need to succeed; it can also mean growing leaders, networks, sharing best practices, and improving communication. Because it so expensive and complicated, this work is an often-ignored piece in education reform.

15. Grimes, Scott, "San Diego City Schools Progress Report Early Gains in Student Achievement", **San Diego Dialogue**, UCSD, November 2001.
16. The improvements, however, are not nearly as real for high school students. Again, the San Diego Dialogue looked closely at test scores for 9th and 10th grade students from Spring 2001 on a locally-adopted literacy assessment, the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (SDRT). This assessment is administered to all students from grades four to eleven to assess their progress in literacy. In 2001, over 36% of the fluent English students in grades 9 and 10 were not meeting the District's standards for literacy.
17. According to the Blueprint, it has been allocated $1.5 million though more than a year into the reform, no schools had received funds.

In San Diego, however, capacity building is at the center of Bersin's reforms. The district has invested in a massive professional development program to drive its reforms. There are workshops for teachers and principals to learn about new literacy and math skills and peer-coaches assigned to every school to assist teachers in putting these skills into practice. The district has also invested heavily in classrooms: every Kindergarten and 1st grade classroom across the district has received money to buy new literacy materials. Focus Schools receive extra funds, a dedicated math specialist, and technical assistance to jump-start their education programs. The district has developed a program to identify and cultivate principals from within its ranks. These potential leaders receive training and mentoring, including an internship with exceptional principals.

While teachers and principals are clearly at the center of all reforms underway in San Diego, the district has also invested time and money to build community and parent support for schools. Plans are underway for a Parent University that will help parents become involved in boosting academic achievement, promoting study skills, and improving parenting skills. The San Diego READS program has put over one million books into city school libraries. And the successful Proposition MM campaign will put over $1 billion into new facilities and repairs.

Although capacity building is a well-thought out part of San Diego's reforms, a few omissions and "zones of wishful thinking" stand out:

- Communication to parents and the general public has been spotty and unclear. The community is confused about the reforms and who they benefit. What they see are the programs and staff that have been cut rather than the new investments and focus on children the district has historically served poorly.
- Schools in low income neighborhoods suffer from a teacher assignment system built into the teacher contract that allows experienced teachers to cluster at schools in well off neighborhoods, sending novice teachers to struggling schools as their first, short stop on the way to a better job. The adversarial relationship between Bersin and the teachers union has made it difficult to get any movement on this issue.
- According to district observers, the loss of student services (the aides, nurses, and counselors) that came with the Blueprint reforms is glaring. They cite anecdotes from parents and teachers who are angry about these cuts and oppose the district, especially Bersin.

School Freedom of Action

School freedom of action refers to opportunities for schools to exercise autonomy. School freedom could be a waiver from regulations, freedom to select staff, or increased control over spending decisions.

In San Diego, there are no known new freedoms for schools. Instead, there was a major centralization that has significantly limited school freedom of action. Starting with the termination of the 5 sub-districts, and carrying through curriculum and teaching mandates, schools have lost a great deal of autonomy under Bersin. Some argue that these were needed changes for a district with many mediocre programs in mediocre schools, but others have described them as a "Stalin-like approach" to education reform. Much like the lack of incentives in the strategy, there are few reasons or ways for schools to take risks, to individualize their programs, or to take responsibility for innovative action. The option to convert to a charter school is available to all district schools under California law, but few schools in San Diego have exercised this option and the district does little to promote the idea.

What Can A Funder Do With This Information? Opportunities for A Strategic and Proactive Role

This information is helpful to a funder because they can choose to do several things. First they can decide if they agree with the district leadership's theory of reform or not. If not, this might not be the right match. Second, they might decide that that this may not be the right time to get involved (there may be other large grant-funded initiatives that might overload the district, or the leadership on the board or in central office may be in turmoil, making a large reform initiative doubtful.) Third, if the fit and timing seem right, they can begin to think about investing in the gaps in the incentives, capacity, and freedom of action of the strategy and suggest investing in these to district leaders. In the case of San Diego, there are some clear areas that a funder might want to support.

A reform strategy that is thorough and sustainable needs incentives to encourage staff to participate, new capacity building measures to equip them with new tools and experiences to improve, and freedom to take risks with new knowledge and be responsible for their actions. The San Diego reforms lack essential elements in several of these categories.

To create more incentives, the district should find ways to reward greatly improved or high performing schools by giving them more autonomy (e.g. more control of their budget). Public recognition of high performing schools could serve as both a reward and a motivator. In addition, high performing schools, principals, and teachers can also be tapped to share their best practices. The district needs to clarify consequences that are attached to performance. The fate of chronically low-performing schools should be clear and fair. Once this is so, the district will have to stick to its plan and follow through.

- Regarding incentives, a funder could help a district structure reward programs to make the best use of public recognition and mentoring.
- It could also provide a district with high-level political support to develop accountability plans with consequences for chronic low performers.

San Diego needs to convey many more frequent, accessible, and consistent messages to teachers and parents that include clear explanations about what is changing, how the changes are likely to affect them, why these changes are so important, and where to find more information. It is not enough that central office is coordinated and thorough. Those on the receiving end of reforms need to know what is happening and how and why it will make life better or more difficult for them.

- A funder could help shape a communications campaign, act as a convener of public forums and support print and television ads explaining the reforms in accessible ways.

San Diego has teacher assignment policies that relegate the least experienced staff to low-performing schools. Beyond merely breaking up clusters of experienced staff lies a bigger issue: current assignment policies prevent schools from deliberately building their own staff and philosophy. The district must either begin to work with or challenge the union to allow schools to select their own staff, or propose ways around assignment policies. Some possibilities include moving to per-pupil funding so that schools can only hire who they can afford based on enrollment (eliminating the clustering of expensive, experienced teachers at some schools) or providing incentives to teach at low performing schools (such as increased pay or awards for staying for 3 years). Regardless, the district should explore ways to attract and retain teachers in its most challenging schools.

- A funder could invest in bringing the union and district together on these issues, could publicize the unfair policies in an attempt to build public demand for change, or help develop pilot programs that experiment with new assignment and incentive structures.

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Finally, while some may understand the need to curtail freedom under the district's initiatives, district leaders should look ahead to a time when schools can gain back some autonomy over their program and clarify that trajectory for everyone in the district.

- A funder could work with the district to help define what this would look like and work with schools that are close to getting there. For example, in a tight/loose/tight scenario, there might be more central oversight and control of low performing schools, a great deal of freedom, autonomy and true responsibility for improving and successful schools.

The Exploratory Case Study provided this foundation with the facts and issues surrounding education reform in San Diego. It also took a close look at what exactly the reforms were, and through it's particular theory of change lens, allowed the foundation to see what the district was doing well and what it needed help with. This would prevent the foundation from duplicating or derailing the work already underway. It also could have told the foundation that the issues were too complex or diffuse to benefit from the kind of investment they were hoping to make.

Such a decision might have been made with the next case.

Denver – Over-reaching Board Threatens Fragile Reform[18]

Denver experienced some dramatic shifts in its public education system over the last 30 years. With court ordered desegregation in 1974, the public school district lost half of its more than 70,000 students. With increased immigration and the end of busing, enrollment rose again, but not without bringing new challenges. Immigration had a profound impact on schools, as one quarter of Denver students enrolled in the bilingual education program. This beleaguered bilingual education program has been operating under consent decrees for over 15 years. Its continued failings angered and disenfranchised the Hispanic community as studies, lawsuits and anecdote pointed to generations of children who received, at best, a poor education.

The arrival of charter schools changed the landscape of education across Colorado, attracting families to schools that tended to offer smaller, more personal education environments. Some of these schools excelled at improving learning for a wide range of socio-economic groups. Governor Owens and the state legislature passed far-reaching statewide reforms and planned to advocate for more. In 1999, the biggest change for Denver was the arrival of a new superintendent, Chip Zullinger. Cautiously welcomed by the city's educators and the general community, Zullinger soon impressed and excited many with his vision, risk-taking and grassroots style.

Zullinger's reforms built on the promising initiatives begun by his predecessor or by various external expectations imposed on the district (statewide learning standards and assessments, the end of busing, a consent decree on bilingual education, a pay-for-performance plan) while adding accountability and public information sharing in an attempt to learn what Denver schools were doing well and where they needed to improve. He developed good relations with teachers and the community, especially the Hispanic community. But he did not win over district staff or school administrators, people Zullinger did not court into understanding how to play their part in his reform plan. The district faced major challenges with educating its growing non-English speaking student population, and in improving its statewide student assessment scores, especially as the state threatened to revoke accreditation of districts that were not improving. Despite these challenges, there was an air of promise in Denver, and many felt that Zullinger had a mandate to take bold steps to try to improve education in Denver, especially for its most needy students.

18. This case study was written in 2001. The facts and conclusions drawn were made at that time and may not be applicable today.

Nine months into his tenure, news came that the Denver School Board had terminated Superintendent Zullinger's contract. Hard working at public outreach and building trust, and a good listener, he was not popular at central office. Several top administrators did not buy into his vision or his closeness with the residents of Denver. They stopped giving him a chance, and began to undercut him with the school board. Zullinger had a weakness as a poor manager – he should have hired new staff that supported him, but he was not focused on central office.

Zullinger was not a manager—neither was he hired to be one. The board brought him to Denver on his strengths as a visionary and leader, claiming they wanted that for Denver. The board soon found that they wanted more, someone who would manage the central office staff and report to them for approval on all plans and proposals. The school board had a reputation as micro-managing and Zullinger chaffed at their interest in day to day affairs and ignored their requests for more involvement. His work on a short deadline with a local university to apply for a grant to improve bilingual education was not brought to the board first. Many board members were infuriated, leading to their choice to buy out his contract.

The firing was upsetting to many. People were disappointed that a window for reform that had opened now seemed to have closed. Zullinger had done such a good job connecting with the Hispanic community that his firing posed trouble with the very people the district most needed to engage. Nine months was not long enough to believe that the board had exhausted efforts of trying to work things out with Zullinger. Turn over and dabbling in one small reform after another suggested that there was not a tradition of any group committed to long-term objectives regarding education in Denver. The district was floundering.

Analysis of the reforms via balance of incentives, capacity and freedom of action

Our analysis of Denver reforms took place before the upheaval in leadership. Below are those findings:

Incentives to Change

As mentioned previously, in education, incentives can be rewards or consequences based on performance. In Denver, they were primarily driven by performance on the state assessments. One incentive was the district and union backed "pay for performance"(PFP) pilot project. The two-year project would give bonuses to teachers who met the goals for their students' academic performance. If the pilot project showed that the bonus had some positive impact on teacher and student performance, then the district and union would look at changing the entire salary structure so that teachers would not get automatic raises based on tenure as they had been.

A companion performance plan for administrators tied one-quarter of their pay raises in 2000 to at least an 8 percent increase of student test scores on the statewide assessment. This was more symbolic than anything else.

Capacity Building Measures

Investing in a district's capacity allows schools and school staff the chance to take risks with new skills and information to guide them. In Denver, this element was not well attended to. No new or better training was on the horizon, except for some training for school Collaborative Decision Making teams (established by Zullinger's predecessor.)

New tools were limited to the opportunity for some schools to select a whole school design, and increased data collection in the form of school report cards.

School Freedom of Action

School freedom of action refers to an opportunity for a school to exercise autonomy. In Denver, there were promising avenues for schools to convert to charter, granting them many freedoms, though as of 2000, no schools had exercised this option. Collaborative Decision Making teams had some very

limited school level budget authority. Aside from charters, there was little freedom or autonomy. Though Zullinger believed that the central office should help schools manage themselves, there were few plans underway to increase school-level autonomy.

What Can A Funder Do With This Information? Opportunities for A Strategic and Proactive Role

Leaving the leadership issue aside for the moment, the district had much to do to build out its reform strategy.

It lacked strong internal incentives to change, though the external threat from the state to remove accreditation of low performing districts should have compelled greater efforts to improve. As with San Diego, the district needed to find ways to reward any greatly improved or high performing schools by giving them more autonomy (e.g. more control of their budget.) In addition, high performing schools, principals, and teachers might have been tapped to share their best practices.

- In this area, a funder could help a district structure reward programs to make the best use of public recognition and mentoring.
- It could also provide a district with high-level political support to develop accountability plans with consequences for chronic low performers.

Capacity building was an incomplete part of Denver's strategy. There were no major initiatives to improve teacher quality in light of the new standards and the district's poor scores. Some plans were taking shape from the outside, such as the Rose Community Foundation investing in the "pay for performance" pilot as a way to restructure the district around teacher performance and to drive professional development. Other missing capacity building elements included focused teacher recruitment, principal training and coaching, sharing of best practices and other kinds of networks, and professional development for all staff to evaluate test scores and other data to use it in a way that would improve student learning.

- A funder could help the district to build a professional development strategy, focusing on areas of weakness and centralizing all training to address those areas. It could fund an audit of the district's professional development plan and budget, much like the Boston Plan for Excellence's audit of Boston Public Schools' professional development. It could convene teachers and administrators and professional development experts. It could fund the piloting of a particular training, evaluate its effectiveness and guide implementation district-wide. It would be a large and difficult job.
- Drilling down, a deeper investment in capacity could start with an in-depth analysis of district-wide and school-by-school strengths and weaknesses. Several years' worth of state assessment results could offer enough information to begin. Were some schools suffering from poor teaching? Was the faculty at some schools unable to come together around a philosophy and student achievement strategy? Did some schools suffer from a lack of leadership? Did the curriculum at individual schools align with the standards and was it appropriate for the school's population of students? These might be some of the most basic elements to be investigated. The central office could spearhead fact-finding efforts at each school to help answer some of these questions. Further resources could then be allocated to the schools most in need to purchase consulting and technical assistance.[19]

19. Findings from a study conducted by CRPE at University of Washington, **Making Standards Work**, Lake et al., March 1999.

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Teacher recruitment was not well attended to either. A teacher recruitment strategy could be built to target the local colleges of education that have the best success with urban districts and bilingual education students. It could also target universities and colleges to get students interested before they graduate, especially in the subject areas most in need of teachers in Denver. The district was free to hire college graduates in any field who lack teacher preparation and provide them with on-the-job training.[20]

- A funder could spearhead this human resource effort, the results of which would have a long lasting impact on education in Denver.

Principal training, and the recruitment and grooming of new leaders, is equally as important as developing a new pool of teacher candidates. Rather than waiting to see who might self-select to apply for principal openings, human resource staff should identify, mentor and train teachers who show leadership potential. For current principals, mentoring, coaching, and sharing of best practices between schools would be crucial ways to spread success throughout the district.

- Again, a funder could back the planning and implementation of leadership building efforts.

The option of charter schools was a promising way to create new schools and to address schools individually on their performance. Troubled schools could convert to charter with new leadership, teachers and designs.

- A funder could make supporting this move to charter schools their education investment.

Regarding school-level freedom, Denver needed to give schools flexibility of funds, resources and the ability to access outside providers for consulting and professional development to help address each school's unique needs. Schools needed to become problem solving organizations, analyzing their test data and climate surveys to determine what is holding them back and seeking out providers who could help them overcome their barriers.

- A funder could support school level problem solving and coordinate consulting resources for them to access.

However, given how much work the district needed to do and the fact that the leadership was in turmoil, the foundation needed to think carefully about whether to invest in a place that clearly was not stable. The Exploratory Case Study gave the foundation the facts and analysis it needed to make an educated choice.

20. "Who Should Teach?" **Education Week**, Mark Walsh, January 2000.

Conclusion

In an era of unprecedented giving to education, and with so much of it aimed at reforming large, troubled urban districts, foundations must ground their investments in a plausible change strategy to prevent large-scale disappointments. They need to know how they think change will happen, and they need to uncover information about the districts they are interested in, in light of that theory, to make informed choices. Improving urban districts – not just a few schools – is work that is vitally important to the health and future of our communities. Getting it right – by making educated, systemic investments –is truly one of the nation's biggest challenges.

Rather than stumbling into the pitfalls of confused reform theories and giving to districts not well matched or ready for change, foundations can use the Exploratory Case Study method to address these needs. There are other reasons to employ the Exploratory Case Study.

- It is accessible. Done well, it is easy to read and to draw conclusions from.
- It contains rich information. It includes history, data, opinions, analysis and recommendations about a district and it's strategies.
- It can point out gaps in strategies. Beyond simply providing information, the format and reasoning can draw attention to missing elements.
- It builds contacts. The process of interviewing many stakeholders allows a foundation to meet people who can help with the investment—contacts inside the district, and outside, such as researchers and evaluators.
- It allows the reader to see the "whole court." More than discrete pieces of information, the research and analysis fit together, joining actors, events and outcomes.

This is not to say that due diligence begins and ends with a case study. There are other issues a funder will want to delve into, especially with regards to hard data on districts and developing agreed-upon indicators of improvement. See Appendix C for further ideas of areas to investigate.

Of course, the process of defining a theory of change and using it is a dynamic one. The theory of change may evolve over time as new information becomes available. With every investment, philanthropists learn new lessons and develop new ideas. The keys however are to think strategically and approach giving proactively. Developing the theory and employing the Exploratory Case Studies take time and effort. But the effort is worth it. A premature or uninformed investment can result not only in a waste of money, but also a lost opportunity.

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APPENDIX A: EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY METHODS

The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington developed Exploratory Case Studies as a way to deepen our research and to understand and analyze systemic reform in urban districts. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is the first foundation to use them as a tool for their own discovery and investment purposes.

What To Look For

A case study researcher is looking to collect a wide variety of opinions in order to tell the most accurate story. In doing so, the researcher must find out, from each of the various sources (see upcoming section on Whom To Talk With), what they perceive to be: the intended goals of the reform, the many strategies being implemented to get there, the issues that have been left out, the reception of ideas by different constituents, and the degree of change at the school and classroom level.

Exploratory Case Study Content

A well-rounded case study should include the topics listed below:

- Overview/history of education reform in the city
- The problem of education in the district/city: What issues are most troublesome?
- Demographics of education in the city: Demographics of district and other school providers (a table similar to the one for Denver below).
- Background on noteworthy state laws, mayoral involvement, recent superintendents, the board of education and the teachers union.

Schooling Options in Denver in 2000	Number of Students (K-12)	Number of Schools			Demographics			
		Number of Elementary Schools	Number of Middle Schools	Number of High Schools	Percent African American	Percent Caucasian	Percent Hispanic	Percent Asian American
Traditional Public Schools	69,776	81	18	12	21	23.4	51.1	3.4
Charter Schools[1]	1,228	2 Elem. 1 K-8	0	1	40	29.2	28.6	1.2
Private Schools	Approx. 5,000	6 K-8	0	4 6-12 1 9-12 2 K-12	Data not in central location	Data not in central location	Data not in central location	Data not in central location
Religious Schools	14,135	38 K-8	0	5	Not available from Archdiocese	Not available from Archdiocese	Not available from Archdiocese	Not available from Archdiocese
Denver Total	90,139	128	18	25	--	--	--	--

1. Two new charter schools set to open in 2000.

23

Exploratory Case Study Content (cont...)

- External forces impacting education, if applicable (immigration, migration, business involvement, charter schools, religious and private schools)
- The current reform strategy—what the district aims to do, what they are doing, and what they have not done
- Performance data: whether the recipient is a school district or a charter school, several years worth of school-by-school data, disaggregated by race is a good way to determine what is currently going on in the organization.
- Budget: how is the budget spent? Is it in deficit, if so, for how many years? If it has been growing, what efforts have been supported by their growing budget?
- Other data: what kind of data does the district currently collect related to the funded effort? Do they have capacity in the area of the funded effort?
- Key assets to reform: What makes now a good time for change?
- Key challenges to reform: What threatens the reforms?
- The strategy analyzed through three criteria: the balance of incentives, capacity, and freedom of action
- Recommendations for the district
- Recommendations for interested funders
- Resource list of interesting leads to follow in each city—people, outside/independent organizations that should be or already are involved in the school reform efforts

Who Researches the Case Study

Case studies are best conducted by a consultant or researcher from an outside organization. Foundation staff could conduct the research, but they would need to be aware of any conflicts their presence as potential funders might bring. Outside research organizations are familiar with this kind of research, have the staff to do it and can do it in a timely and neutral manner, with fairness and credibility.

How To Conduct The Research

Information can be drawn from many sources including articles, reports, school and district documents, and interviews. To begin the research, a literature review is important. This could go back several years to get a historical picture, but the most useful data will come from the most recent articles and reports of the most recent year. The best places to look are: the local or regional newspaper website archives, the school district web page, and local university research centers that study and write about the district. In reading these, the researcher will get a historical account of what has gone on in the city and district, and will likely begin getting names of people to contact later. Interviews and documents must be analyzed using standard qualitative data techniques.

Once this background research has been conducted, interviews can be planned. Researchers should explain to interviewees in advance why the research is being undertaken, why the person has been selected to be interviewed and how the interview will be used. In past case studies conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, interviews have not been attributed to any one person, and the results have been included a book, and a report to

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help a foundation understand the work and issues in the district to better inform giving.

Whom To Talk With

Interviews might start with the superintendent. The superintendent can provide a broad overview of his or her vision of the reform strategies, why they were chosen and how they perceive them to be implemented. In addition, the superintendent can provide access to others in the district. Or, research might start with some district outsiders, such as university researchers, a local education reporter, or a respected local education fund to get their take on what is going on in the district, and perhaps to learn who the best district sources will be.

From the background web research, some names should be starting to stand out: school district leaders, union leaders, parent activists, innovative school leaders, grassroots watchdog groups, community and church leaders who are active in education reform, local foundations or business groups that invest in, or critique, the district, university researchers who study the district, and newspaper education reporters. Each has a different angle on the story, and it is through their combined and sometimes conflicting stories that an accurate picture emerges. Prior approval is often necessary to interview at schools and districts – indeed in some districts, all interviews are set up by district personnel. Email, faxes or calls to central office can get the first interviews set up, and they will usually instruct you on how to get more interviews or to talk to school leaders. Though this constricts who gets to tell the story, most interviewees are still quite helpful and in many cases, even the teacher of the year or the budget director are anxious to talk about how they think the district is doing, the issues that frustrate them or make their jobs difficult.

It is difficult to say who are the most informative sources – each case is different. Outsiders have the least investment and therefore are more apt to point out areas of weakness, but some insiders, especially principals and teachers, are very open and glad to be able to talk to someone about the changes and mandates that, for good or ill, are making their jobs more complicated. Regardless, the researcher should attempt to interview as broad a group as possible to piece the story together.

Important Questions To Ask

Each person interviewed should be asked a standard list of questions. However, the interviews can include questions specific to each interviewee, and can build upon the information learned from earlier interviews. This framework delves into the theories of change, or cause and effect ideas, behind the reforms, and the strengths and weaknesses of reform efforts.

The first questions are usually very broad.

- What do you understand the reform to be?
- What are the actions that are underway?
- How do these actions link to the reform goals?
- Are the ideas and vision broadly shared among teachers, administrators, etc.?
- What efforts are being made to get everyone on board?
- How will these actions make schools work better?
- How will the district know when it has achieved success—what are the measurements?
- Could the reforms carry on if the district leader or other major innovator departed?

The interviews should also take into account the person's position to the reform—from a teacher, one might want to know how or if the district's reforms affect their classroom; from a business

25

group, one might want to know what accountability measures they ask for when giving money to the district and whether the funds are aligned to district goals; and from a principal, one might want to know what kinds of tools the district has given them to undertake new responsibilities or mandates. After several interviews, the researcher will know which issues to spend more time on, and which ones are not helpful in learning more about the reform.

The Written Product

The case study can be written based on the outline mentioned under Case Format. The end result could be a 15-20-page analysis of the educational issues and assets evident in the area being studied.

The draft can be given to one or more people associated with the district who can read it for accuracy. The researcher must make clear to these readers that their views are important and will be seriously considered, but beyond data and fact clarification, some of their suggested changes might not be made if they don't reflect what the interviews and research indicated. Any reader may disagree with parts of the case, and it important to let the reader(s) know that while you are asking for their opinion, you are not seeking their approval.

Dissemination of the Case Study

Who should have access to the case study? At the beginning of the process, the researchers discuss with the project funder how the case study will be used and who will get it. Will it be just for the funder, or made available to top administrators or more? Is it going to be published, will it be available to the press, will it be posted on a website? Because it is such a useful baseline and evaluation tool, school and district leaders involved in the reform will benefit by receiving it. Beyond that, it is up to the organization that commissions it to decide who should get it and how it should be circulated.

APPENDIX B: EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF SAN DIEGO

Christine Campbell, with Michael DeArmond, Maria McCarthy, Meaghan McElroy
Center On Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, **February 2001**

I. OVERVIEW Education in San Diego—A district in the spotlight

For years, San Diego's preferred self-image was that of a small coastal town, a place far removed from the hubbub of its famous neighbor to the north. The truth in this image – that San Diego is no Los Angeles – does not erase the fact that in recent decades San Diego has seen its share of "big city" problems. Gang violence and crime grew in the late 1980s; the city's economy fell into a recession in the 1990s when the federal government closed local military bases. Add immigration, poverty, income inequality and San Diego's "coastal town" begins to look more and more like a big city. Not surprisingly, its schools have increasingly faced big-city challenges too. For years they have struggled with a disturbingly high achievement gap between poor and minority students and wealthy white students.

Recent business community interest in the city's schools, in addition to growing concern from elite community residents, have begun a movement for change in the schools that San Diego's many ethnic and neighborhood groups had long sought but been unable to build. Meanwhile, in 1998, the San Diego school board was in the market for a new superintendent. With the business community and local civic elites pushing for change, the Board of Education initiated a nationwide search for its new superintendent, courting candidates who had backgrounds outside of education. In the end, the board chose the local U.S. Attorney to run the billion-dollar school district. He, in turn, recruited a nationally acclaimed Chancellor of Instruction to head the instructional side of his team.

Today, many people in San Diego are attuned to education, paying attention to school board races, controversial district plans, and the personalities of district leaders. People across the nation are also paying attention – and there is plenty of reason to watch: a non-traditional superintendent and a veteran educator running the district together, an involved community, and an active business community. Will this leadership translate into improved educational outcomes for San Diego's children, especially those who are poor and minority? And will it remain stable enough to pursue and sustain change over the long haul?

II. THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION IN SAN DIEGO

The San Diego City School District enrolls over 141,000 students and 180 schools; it is the second largest district in California and eighth largest in the nation. Extreme differences in wealth exist across the district's schools and, as in many cities, the distribution of high-achieving schools in the district follows wealth. Almost two thirds of the San Diego City School District's students are minorities. Hispanics represent the majority (37%), followed by Asian Americans (17%) and African Americans (16%). A majority of the city's students are also poor – approximately 60 percent are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. And for many San Diego students, English is not a first language. 28 percent are, in the state's language, "English language learners."[2]

Disparities in achievement have a long history in San Diego and are tied to race as well as class. A 1967 class-action lawsuit charged that the district provided "an inferior education to minority students" at 23 of its schools.[3] This lawsuit led to "a variety of programs, magnet schools and a busing system to improve performances among minority students and to encourage integration."[4] But thirty years later, the achievement gap remains.

The odds were, and still are, stacked against ethnic minorities when it comes to quality of education in San Diego. Latino and African-American students are concentrated at the poorest of San Diego's schools. High-poverty schools hire twice as many

2. California Department of Education, School Fiscal Services Division and Educational Demographics Unit - Language Census. www.cde.ca.gov
3. "San Diego fights gap in learning," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Maureen Magee, March 8, 1999.
4. Ibid.

27

new teachers as wealthy schools, suggesting that the students who most need stability and experience from their teachers are unlikely to get it. Wealthy schools also enroll twice as many students in Advanced Placement courses than lower income schools. [5]

Abysmal student performance is the result of these conditions. Poor and minority students "drop out of school more often, score lower on standardized tests, and are generally less prepared for college."[6] The dropout rate at high-poverty schools is roughly five times that of low-poverty schools. Though on average San Diego students score around the state mean on the state's new Stanford 9 (SAT9) assessment, there is a vast difference between the scores of low-income students and their better-off peers in San Diego. A regular 20 to 30-point spread divides the two groups in every grade and in every subject.

The district has embarked on an ambitious set of reforms in order to shrink the pronounced achievement gap. These efforts might be paying off. San Diego's spring 2000 SAT9 scores showed a narrowing of the gap in elementary grades (indeed, in the early elementary grades San Diego's students often score above the state average[7]). But these improvements did not occur uniformly across the city and it is hard to know how to credit the increases. Though test scores are improving, historical distinctions in achievement remain.

The issues San Diego faces—the achievement gap, teacher and parent wariness to change—are significant and vexing. Ultimately, these challenges will test whether ambitious reforms and unorthodox district leaders can succeed where others have failed.

III. BACKGROUND - The State, City, Board of Education, Former Superintendents, and Teachers Union

San Diego's challenges and new reforms operate in several broader contexts: reforms at the state level, programs at the city level, the work of recent superintendents, and actions of the school board and local teachers union. This section covers each of these areas, beginning with the role of the state.

The State of California

Numerous statewide reform measures introduced by Governor Gray Davis and his predecessor Pete Wilson provide important context for education reform in San Diego. The Class Size Reduction (CSR) measure, passed by the California legislature in 1996, aims to cut class size in grades 1-3 (to a maximum of 20 students). In April 1999, Governor Davis passed the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA). Its principal component, the Academic Performance Index (API), was intended to create a school ranking system for every public school in the state based upon school performance and student academic achievement. Also under the PSAA, schools labeled "underperforming" (falling below the 50th percentile in SAT9 performance for two consecutive years) are eligible for voluntary state assistance funds. Under Wilson's administration, charter schools across California are poised to receive strong state support through a recently appointed Secretary of Education who champions charter schools.

The San Diego City Governance: The Golding to Murphy Administration

The San Diego mayor's office has traditionally had an amicable hands-off relationship with the school district. Current Mayor Dick Murphy, elected in November 2000, will likely maintain this relationship.

5. "Measuring the Achievement Gap in San Diego City Schools", **San Diego Dialogue**, UCSD, B. Mehan and S. Grimes, March 1999.
6. "San Diego fights gap in learning," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Maureen Magee, March 8, 1999.
7. "County's math SAT numbers increase; Verbal scores the same as last year," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Chris Moran, August 30, 2000.

San Diego Superintendents: The Transition to Bersin

For a large urban school district, San Diego has had one of the most stable leadership histories in the country (only three superintendents in the last 18 years). Though few in number, its leaders represent a range of leadership styles and a variety of approaches to improving San Diego's schools. One of the main achievements of Thomas Payzant, who ran the district from 1983-93, was the institution of site-governance teams (made up of teachers, principals, and parents), which have complicated decision-making for future superintendents in San Diego by making decisive action difficult.[8] His successor, Bertha Pendleton, an assistant superintendent under Payzant, instituted controversial new programs—reducing class size in elementary grades, developing a potentially rigorous accountability system, creating academic standards, and channeling resources away from affluent schools to poorer schools—in response to the wide achievement gap and shrinking state and local resources. Pendleton was criticized both for a disjointed accumulation of reform programs and for engaging in top-down leadership.

In the spring of 1998, Bersin was chosen to lead the school district by a board that had been interested in non-education candidates for the superintendent position. (Bersin had most recently been U.S. Attorney. Since 1993, he was the Clinton Administration's "border czar" on immigration and drug issues in California).[9] After being hired by the board, Bersin began a tutorial in education leadership by visiting local schools and talking to teachers and students. He visited other school systems to look at successful programs; he consulted researchers and thinkers from Harvard University to San Diego. He then put together a transition team to develop a reform plan tailored to San Diego's needs.

One of Bersin's first decisive moves was to split the job of superintendent into two roles: one administrative, the other instructional. He would handle the administration and management side. On the instructional side, Bersin recruited Anthony Alvarado, former chancellor of New York City's public schools and more recently a 10-year superintendent of the much-touted District 2 in Manhattan. Alvarado has developed the district's Institute of Learning to "oversee literacy instruction as well as a new and massive effort to help teachers boost instruction techniques" and is a driving force behind the district's comprehensive reforms.[10]

The San Diego School Board

The San Diego School Board has five members, constituting a three-two split in favor of Superintendent Bersin's reforms. The split reflects a larger rift in the city between two key interest groups: the business community and the teachers union (while the business community supports Bersin's decisive and, at times, divisive actions, the union president regularly complains about Bersin's top-down policymaking). Despite the discord brought by the split, San Diego voters seem indifferent to it. In the November 2000 election, they returned three incumbent candidates to the board and preserved the 3-2 split in favor of Bersin.

The San Diego Education Association

The San Diego Education Association is a powerful player in San Diego's education scene. In general, union officials have criticized the overall tone of Alvarado and Bersin's reforms. More often than not, the union and district have collided over how things were done – the process – more than the substance of what was actually done. Educators criticize Alvarado for top-down dictates that aren't connected with the classroom. Disagreements between the union and district have been angry, prompting a handful of demonstrations. [11] Union head Knapp reported to the board that a union survey of 400 of the district's 8,000 teachers indicated that teachers were unhappy with the superintendent.[12] Though this number was small, anecdotal evidence and other surveys suggest that Knapp and the union actually do speak for the vast majority of teachers in San Diego.[13]

8. "Strike tested mettle of superintendent," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Mark Sauer, February 12, 1996.
9. San Diego's New Chief an Unlikely Pick," **Education Week**, Bess Keller, March 18, 1998.
10. "Leaders From Other Professions Reshape America's Schools, From Top to Bottom," **Education Week**, Tamar Lewin, June 8, 2000.
11. Ibid.
12. "Schools chief Bersin gets praise, criticism and bonus," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Maureen Magee, September 29, 1999.
13. Since this case was written, Knapp has initiated more teacher surveys to measure teacher unhappiness with Bersin: According to the Union-Tribune, in a June 2001 survey conducted by the union, with almost two-thirds of teachers responding, 93 percent said that morale was poor or only fair; 78 percent did not believe that the Blueprint reforms would improve the quality of education in San Diego and 93 percent reported that they had no confidence in the superintendent or his administration.

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IV. EXTERNAL FORCES IMPACTING EDUCATION

The business community, charter schools, and area parochial and independent schools exert varying levels of pressure on the district. Together these forces remind the district that it needs to satisfy parents and push for academic improvement or it risks having students opt out of the system.

Business Community Support

Founded in 1993, San Diego's Chamber of Commerce Foundation supports education reform efforts within San Diego City Schools. Recent investments include the support of legislation, best practices, data collection, accountability, and charter schools. Its most recent investment – the Longitudinal Academic Progress Study – is designed to help schools use data to make strategic decisions about student achievement and program quality.[14]

The Chamber Foundation and the San Diego Business Roundtable publicly and financially endorsed pro-Bersin school board candidates in the 2000 school board elections. In addition to official chamber support, the election drew involvement from prominent business and community leaders. According to some, the backlash against this expensive but unsuccessful campaign to unseat an anti-Bersin incumbent partly explains her victory.[15] The business community demonstrated its ability to organize itself around education issues, but many voters are skeptical of their involvement and Bersin's improvement plans.

Charter Schools

Approximately 6,000 students attend 16 charter schools in San Diego.[16] While the district neither opposes nor supports them, several groups outside of the district have championed charters as a way to provide educational options to students who are ill-served by their neighborhood public school choices. Demand for charter schools in San Diego has grown consistently each year.

Parochial and other independent schools[17]

There are 24 Catholic schools in San Diego serving over 9,000 students. Together these schools provide a substantial alternative to the public schools. The average tuition for a Catholic elementary school is about $2,500. Catholic high schools cost about $5,200. Approximately 85 percent of Catholic schools have waiting lists.

V. SAN DIEGO'S CURRENT EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

"If student achievement is not the star by which we navigate," warned Bersin in a 1999 interview, "the adults now involved in public education will lose the franchise."[18] With stakes this high, he has not been timid about reform. Bersin has taken decisive and often controversial action in three broad areas – instruction, facilities, and administration. This section looks at those efforts, starting with the most important: his wholesale reform of what goes on in San Diego's classrooms.

Improving Instruction

From the beginning, Bersin's ideas were guided by Alvarado's work in New York, especially his focus on literacy and staff development. Soon after Alvarado's arrival in 1998, his Institute for Learning developed a literacy framework and expanded training programs for teachers and principals. Alvarado's Institute wrote the ***Blueprint for Student Success in a Standards-Based System*** in late 1999 to systematize and explain how he and Bersin hoped to improve San Diego's schools. The plan set a course for closing the achievement gap and ending social promotion. It is the driving force behind change in San Diego.

Bersin's plans for improving education in San Diego were controversial from the start. Opponents believed that his strategy was developed in secret, and that the elimination of over 600 teacher's aids to free up money for his reforms was a mistake.[19] The teachers union grew angry over a plan to introduce teacher "coaches" into the district's classrooms. According to the union, local school

14. The Chamber Foundation Web Site, 2000. www.thechamberfoundation.org
15. "Zimmerman adds votes in school board race," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, November 14, 2000.
16. District and charter school figures gathered from California Department of Education, DataQuest web site, http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/.
17. All information contained in this section was gathered from conversations with staff at the Archdiocese of San Diego, Education Offices, January 9, 2000.
18. "In San Diego, Pace is Quick Under Bersin," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Bess Keller, August 4, 1999.
19. "Battle over the 'blueprint'; School overhaul plan, up for vote today, splits district," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Maureen Magee, March 14, 2000.

councils should choose the coaches. According to Bersin and Alvarado, the district should do it.[20] In early May 1999, about 2,000 teachers rallied outside district headquarters to protest Bersin's "top down" management style.[21] (In the end, both sides agreed to a peer coach certification program that would be housed at San Diego State University).

The Blueprint

The district's strategy, outlined in the ***Blueprint***, is designed to end social promotion and improve student achievement in literacy and mathematics. It includes programs that apply to all students (called Prevention Strategies), programs that apply to struggling students (Intervention Strategies), and programs that apply to students who have been held back a grade (Retention Strategies). Students fall into these last two categories if they fail to meet performance criteria on district-wide assessments in reading and mathematics.

Prevention Strategies center on the district's new uniform curriculum for literacy and mathematics and include in-school coaching and workshops for teachers and investments in new classroom materials. Intervention Strategies include summer school, intersession, and extended day programs for students who are not performing at the expected level, and extended blocks of time for literacy and math study. Unofficially referred to as ***Blueprint II*** (even though it is part of the original plan), the Retention Strategies will begin in earnest in 2001. Students who are behind at the end specified grades will be retained and placed in what the district calls accelerated classes. These classes will focus only on reading and mathematics, they will be small (15-20 students, depending on the grade), and they will follow an 11-month school year.

In addition to these strategies, chronically low-performing schools, called Focus Schools, receive extra support under the ***Blueprint*** plan. Focus Schools are elementary or middle schools whose API places them in the lowest two statewide ranks. The plan calls for these schools to be reorganized into Academic Magnets that include an 11-month school year, additional curricular materials in literacy and mathematics, extra teacher coaches, special classes for parents, and an EarlyLink preschool program at elementary schools. The ***Blueprint*** also includes a Performance Reward Program to identify and reward schools that demonstrate significant gains in student achievement, but the reward program's status is unclear.[22]

The district pays for ***Blueprint*** programs largely by redirecting integration and Title I funding away from teaching assistants and through savings realized by thinning out the central office. Like the debate over who would choose teacher coaches, these funding methods have made some parents and teachers angry.[23]

Other Education Initiatives

In addition the ***Blueprint*** plan, the district is pursuing other initiatives to improve education in San Diego. The district is developing the Educational Leadership Development Academy to cultivate school leaders from within its own ranks. The district also started a community literacy campaign in April 1999 called San Diego READS, which has collected and disbursed 1.3 million books for supplemental reading materials in classrooms and libraries. In another initiative, the district is moving ahead with plans to evaluate the effect of the ***Blueprint***. Alvarado's Institute has been collecting data on student performance at all levels, including by race. In November 2001, American Institutes for Research will submit a report evaluating the ***Blueprint*** that will cover both the student outcomes tied to the reform and the implementation of the reforms over a 3-year period.

All of these efforts and the reforms in the ***Blueprint*** are meant to improve academic achievement by changing how teachers and students work. In addition, Bersin has worked to improve the quality of the district's facilities and to streamline its central office.

20. "Bersin plans literacy mentors despite union," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Maureen Magee, April 9, 1999.
21. According to the Blueprint, it has been allocated $1.5 million though no schools have received funds.
22. "Reform is order of the day as 176 city schools reopen," **San Diego Union-Tribune**, Susan Gemroowski, September 6, 2000.
23. "In San Diego, Pace is Quick Under Bersin," **Education Week**, Bess Keller, August 4, 1999.

31

Facilities Improvement and Adminstration Reform

San Diego is poised to make major investments in its facilities. In 1998, Bersin campaigned aggressively for a $1.51 billion school bond – Proposition MM – to refurbish the district's schools. The measure passed with 78 percent of the vote in a September 1998 election.[24] In response to a 19-month delay in the facility plan's implementation, San Diego hired retired Rear Admiral Louis Smith in November 2000 to oversee the complicated array of projects slated to go forward under the measure.

From the beginning, Bersin brought changes to the district's central office. Early changes included the new Institute for Learning and the replacement of assistant superintendents with "instructional leaders," whose main job is to focus on the quality of teaching in their district. When the school board directed Bersin to cut at least 5 percent from central-office costs, he went further and reduced the administrative budget by 13 percent through a series of firings and job consolidations. (Approximately $10 million for teacher coaches and other reforms was generated by eliminating 120 administrative jobs between 1999 and 2000).

VI. KEY ASSETS FOR REFORM[25]

San Diego City Schools have four major assets that can support the reform efforts already underway:

Strong and Committed Leadership

With their willingness to publicly acknowledge the district's problems, to share leadership responsibilities, to utilize best practice strategies for improvement, and to attract experts to their team, Bersin and Alvarado are strong and committed leaders focused on improving the city's schools. Between its two leaders, the district has a division of labor that can keep demanding and complex tasks moving forward.

Organized and Interested Business Community

With the arrival of so many high tech companies in San Diego, business community resources for education have exploded. The business community is active and aggressive about improving student achievement and are plugged in through the Chamber of Commerce and its education foundation.

Voter Support for Spending Money on Schools

Despite a conservative electorate, voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition MM, the second largest bond in California history, to increase funds for improving and building school facilities.

Training and Expert Advice from Local Universities

Local universities provide several levels of support to the district including the preparation of teachers, providing a supply of teacher professional development, supplying research that keeps pace with district efforts and community sentiment, and acting as critical friends of district reform.

VII. KEY CHALLENGES TO THE REFORM

While the Bersin/Alvarado team has produced a solid and plausible reform strategy combined with a commitment to the district, when it comes to making major change in schools, a good plan and serious commitment are not enough. Though there are many reasons to be hopeful about school reform in San Diego, it nonetheless faces several challenges:

24. "In San Diego, Pace is Quick Under Bersin," **Education Week**, Bess Keller, August 4, 1999.

25. Since this case was written, a 5th asset should be mentioned: the role of outside philanthropic resources, coming from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Hewlett Packard, and The Atlantic Philanthropies among others, totaling tens of millions of dollars.

Strong leadership on unstable ground

Though the school board is currently split 3-2 in Bersin's favor, this could change at any time, as the close November 2000 election demonstrates. While business connections and resources have advanced Bersin's agenda and helped finance his initiatives, there seems to be a general and persistent dislike of the business community's involvement in schools among teachers and the broader community.

Poor relationship with teachers and teachers union

Although many of Bersin's reforms are being met with interest and success at the school level once they are implemented, teachers and the union rarely give credit to Bersin for the benefits they experience in the classroom. The antagonism between Bersin and Knapp, the union head, filters down quickly to the teaching staff. Alvarado also has been the target for criticism and blame in San Diego.

Lack of effective communication between the district and parents

Though the district has outlined ways to improve its communication with parents about the ***Blueprint***, these efforts are neither well in place nor far reaching enough. Many parents are angry because the ***Blueprint***'s immense implementation costs resulted in cuts of teachers aides and other programs that parents valued.

Demanding and Ambitious Reforms

Bersin's decision to centralize the district's curriculum – particularly literacy and math programs – has brought wide-ranging change across the system that creates several challenges. The mandated literacy program has caused some resentment in the schools that worry they will lose good literacy programs and techniques that are already in place. The math side of the ***Blueprint*** may be an afterthought, playing second fiddle to the district's focus on literacy. Most worrisome, the core of the reform rests on volatile ground yet to come: the holding back of students who do not meet performance standards.

Sense of complacency about minority achievement in San Diego schools

Despite the achievement gap's persistence and the district's attention through the ***Blueprint***, there is a lack of urgency in San Diego about the education of low-income students. The San Diego populace may be naively complacent about the need for drastic reforms because it rarely sees compelling data about discrepancies in student achievement. When the driving issues of equity and adequacy fail to break the surface in a clear and powerful way, it is difficult to use them to motivate people to change.

Frequent teacher turnover in low performing schools

High-poverty schools in San Diego hire twice as many new teachers as higher-income schools do. This is because new teachers begin their careers in large urban districts where openings are plentiful and leave to work in wealthy nearby districts once they earn tenure. Because teachers are assigned to schools through a post and bid process (as dictated by the union contract), senior teachers always have first choice – and often choose higher income, higher performing schools.

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Miscommunication and poor public relations

For a district with nationally admired leadership and ideas, it is surprising how poorly teachers and parents have received Bersin's efforts in San Diego. The district has mistakenly assumed that the logic behind its decisions would be enough to convince people of the reform's merit. This assumption has not served the district well and Bersin's moves have been controversial from the start.

VIII. ANALYSIS OF SAN DIEGO'S EDUCATION REFORM STRATEGY

— Incentives, Capacity Building Measures and Freedom of Action for Schools

The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington has studied a variety of education reform strategies and determined that those with any hope of making real, long lasting change must have three strong and interdependent elements: (1) ***incentives for school performance***, (2) ***ways of increasing school capabilities***, and (3) ***freedom of action for school staff to change how they serve students***.[26] What follows is an analysis of the San Diego reforms through these requisite elements.

Incentives to Improve

Incentives can take the form of rewards or consequences based on performance. There are not many incentives to speak of in San Diego, and those that exist seem to boil down to informal pressure for personal and professional improvement. The ***Blueprint*** mentions a Performance Reward Program to identify and reward schools that demonstrate significant gains in student achievement at each school level but the reward program's status is unclear. The state provides some financial rewards for schools that meet or exceed their growth targets.[27] But these rewards will not go to many schools or individuals throughout the state and it is too soon to tell whether they induce improvements or not.

Though there are few rewards to speak of, there are also few consequences attached to poor performance. At the district level, the Focus schools are under watch, but to date there is no clarity about how many years they will be allowed to continue if they fail to improve. The state is also not clear about what it will do with under performing schools that receive state funds but do not improve.

Capacity Building Measures

Capacity building often implies investing in people's skills or supplying them with the tools they need to succeed; it can also mean growing leaders, networks, sharing best practices, and improving communication. Capacity building is at the center of Bersin's reforms. The district has invested in a massive professional development program to drive its reforms. These are evident in the literacy and math workshops and the peer-coaches assigned to every school to assist teachers in putting these skills into practice. The district has also invested heavily in classroom literacy materials, technical assistance for Focus Schools, and the development of a program to identify and cultivate school leaders from within its ranks. The district has also invested time and money to build community and parent support for schools. In addition to the San Diego READS program, plans are underway for a Parent University that will help parents become involved in boosting academic achievement, promoting study skills, and improving parent-child relationships.

Although capacity building is a well thought out part of San Diego's reforms, a few holes stand out: it is clear that the district needs to further develop its ability to communicate to the public; it needs to create a teacher assignment system that allows struggling schools to build strong teams of teachers; and finally, it needs to somehow address the loss of student services (the aides, nurses, and counselors) that came with the ***Blueprint*** reforms.

26. A detailed explanation of this reasoning can be found in the case study introduction paper.
27. Schools that meet growth targets are awarded up to $150 per student, and in 2000, a one-time award to all full time teachers at these schools (approximately $800 per staff). One thousand teachers and principals in these schools with the biggest gains will receive $25K each.

School Freedom of Action or Opportunity

School freedom of action refers to opportunities for schools to exercise autonomy. For example, school freedom could be a waiver from regulations, freedom to select staff, or increased control over spending decisions. In San Diego, there are no known new freedoms for schools. Starting with the termination of the 5 sub-districts, and carrying through curriculum and teaching mandates, there is a major centralization underway that may actually limit school freedom of action. Much like the lack of incentives in the strategy, there are few reasons or ways for schools to take risks, to individualize their programs, or to take responsibility for innovative action. The option to convert to a charter school is available to all district schools under California law, but few schools in San Diego have exercised this option.

IX. SUMMARY OF SAN DIEGO PUBLIC SCHOOL'S REFORM

In less than three years, San Diego's schools have seen plenty of change. Superintendent Alan Bersin's energy and boldness have brought experts' advice, large investments in curricula and materials, training and staff development, and major investments in facilities. The ***Blueprint*** reforms are impressive in their scope and are moving steadily forward. Managing by mandate, he has put improving student achievement, and more specifically closing the achievement gap, at the center of everything the district does.

Despite impressive strides and bold ideas, Bersin's reforms have been confounded by a general sense of complacency throughout the city and the education system. Because there is little sense of urgency about education in San Diego, many people do not see the connection between the hard work and sacrifice required by the reforms and the chance to improve education for disadvantaged children in San Diego.

To complicate things further, Bersin's push for change has also been marked by unnecessary conflict. He has moved ahead in spite of a lack of support from teachers and their union who criticize his "top-down" management. His 3-2 board support is steady, but it could change in the next election. The district continues to stumble over its communications with parents and teachers so that front-line dislike of Bersin and Alvarado remains despite positive changes in the classrooms. Going into a third year at the helm, Bersin and Alvarado can no longer be viewed as agents of change inheriting problems from past administrations—the problems are now theirs. And now they are poised to launch what will be the most controversial piece of their reforms: retention strategies to hold back many thousands of under-achieving students. Handling this next phase of their reforms will be a great test of Bersin and Alvarado's dynamic leadership.

X. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN DIEGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Despite an array of challenges, the district has embarked on some of the most promising reforms of any district in the nation. To mitigate the challenges it faces and to increase its chances of success, the district should consider the following actions.

Build good will with teachers.

When Bersin unveiled the ***Blueprint*** and announced the redirection of Title I and integration funds away from support roles (aides, counselors and nurses), he did so with the promise that he would channel these funds back into schools in strategic ways. Though this sounds like an even trade, it came across very poorly and to this day teachers and parents rue the loss of their support workers. As the ***Blueprint*** moves into its next phase, teachers are being asked to work harder and under increasingly difficult circumstances (everything will heat up further when students get retention notices in the coming months); teachers are stressed and put upon. Few have gotten over the loss of their nurses and counselors who played important support roles in schools. The losses are a source of anger within the teachers union and among parents who do not understand the district's plans and clearly miss the support of aides and others.

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As a result, parents and teachers are upset and remain skeptical of Bersin, regardless of how well his reforms improve the working life of teachers or student achievement.

So what can the district do? For starters, it can publicly admit that these positions were vital to schools and that it was a very difficult decision to cut them. Replacing these positions may be too costly for the district, but as a sign of good will the district should commit to finding a way to bring them back to schools. One way to do this might be partnering with public and private social service and health organizations. Opening the school boundaries to other providers might be good for the schools and children. Then the district can focus on the business of improving teaching and learning while still providing important support services that teachers and parents miss.

Fill gaps in the incentives, capacity, and freedom of action elements of the San Diego strategy.
As mentioned in the previous section, a reform strategy that is thorough and sustainable needs to encourage staff to participate, equip them with new tools and experiences to improve, and give them the freedom to take risks with new knowledge and be responsible for their actions. The San Diego reforms lack essential elements in each of these categories.

To create more incentives, the district should find ways to reward greatly improved or high performing schools by giving them more autonomy (e.g. more control of their budget). Public recognition of high performing schools could serve as both a reward and a motivator. In addition, high performing schools, principals, and teachers can also be tapped to share their best practices. The district needs to clarify consequences that are attached to performance. The fear of the unknown can be crippling when it comes to accountability. The fate of chronically low-performing schools needs to be clear and fair. Once this is so, the district will have to stick to its plan and follow through.

As noted before, the district needs to convey many more frequent, accessible, and consistent messages to teachers and parents that include clear explanations about what is changing, how the changes are likely to affect them, why these changes are so important, and where to find more information. It is not enough that central office is coordinated and thorough. Those on the receiving end of reforms need to know what is happening and how and why it will make life better or more difficult for them.

The district should also look at improving teacher assignment policies and teacher recruitment so that low-performing schools are not left with the least experienced staff. Beyond the capacity question of how to break up clusters of experienced staff lies a bigger issue: current assignment policies prevent schools from deliberately building their own staff and philosophy. The district must either begin to work with or challenge the union to allow schools to select their own staff, or propose ways around assignment policies. Some possibilities include moving to per-pupil funding so that schools can only hire who they can afford based on enrollment (eliminating the clustering of expensive, experienced teachers at some schools) or providing incentives to teach at low performing schools (such as increased pay or awards for staying for 3 years). Regardless, the district should explore ways to attract and retain teachers in its most challenging schools.

Finally, while some may understand the need to curtail freedom under the district's initiatives, district leaders should look ahead to a time when schools can gain back some autonomy over their program and clarify that trajectory for everyone in the district.

Initiate a campaign to expose the achievement gap and San Diego's efforts to reduce it.
As mentioned earlier, there is a sense of complacency regarding the low scores and poor outcomes of low income and minority children in the city. The district should use its business community support to enlist the help of a public relations agency to

create an effective, citywide campaign to get this issue and its tragic results to the forefront of residents' minds. In addition, concrete elements from the ***Blueprint*** aimed at addressing the gap should be linked to this campaign to underscore that all the sacrifices and hard work are for a very important reason.

Develop a data system to measure what is important.[28] Data collection in the district must be synthesized in a way so that teachers, parents, and other community members can make use of it. The district and parents could learn a lot if certain data were collected and made available. At the very least data should include current test scores and whether they are rising, falling, or staying stagnant over the last few years. It should measure how many families select the school as their first choice and whether this number has been changing over the last few years. It should track how many teacher applicants there are per opening and whether the staff are satisfied with the climate, leadership, and team cohesiveness at the school and whether this is growing or not. It should measure the experience of the faculty at the school. It should compare the school to others in the district in terms of resources received from the district and whether there are any disenfranchised groups on state assessments. With this information, both the school and district have a wealth of information from which to make decisions.

The district has hired an outside evaluator to assess the ***Blueprint***. This is an important step. But it must also develop ongoing and immediate indicators of progress towards district-wide goals. So far it is not entirely clear what those goals are and what the steps are along the way that would indicate whether the district was headed in the right direction or not.

San Diego City Schools has important elements in place to improve education for all students in the district. The above actions can help remove some of the barriers it has encountered so far and will solidify the reforms in place and those on the horizon.

XII. GUIDING QUESTIONS AND AREAS FOR ACTION

Guiding Questions

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's education work in San Diego will be multifaceted. The large geographic area selected by the Foundation for intensive focus is home to 20,000 children, many of whom attend weak and struggling public schools. Because the reforms being put forth by the San Diego School District are fairly comprehensive and geared to help the lowest performing students, AECF will want to support some of this district-wide work. In addition, there is a great deal of neighborhood-based work that AECF will also want to encourage and support—ranging from parent groups to new charter schools. Throughout, the Foundation should keep in mind several key questions to ground its work:

? **What works?** Which schools (public, private and religious) are having the greatest success with educating neighborhood children? Why?

? **Are parents informed?** How do families find out what is the best public or private school for their child? Is information being collected and communicated? How can such information be better communicated?

? **What can help now?** How can families access and advocate for good schools now while they work to attract high quality schools for the future? How might families overcome obstacles such as tuition, transportation, and the limiting effects of poor performing schools?

? **How can the community improve its schools?** If local schools are lacking in quality, what might improve them? If the problems seem intractable, how might the community be sure that they can start one or more new schools in their neighborhood?

28. The research and recommendations in this section come from Marguerite Roza's yet unpublished work on school data systems, funded by the Brookings Institution, presented at a forum in March 2000.

37
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These broad questions should guide the site teams' work. Though there may be no answers to them yet, they will help focus the Foundation's work to improve educational opportunity in both the short and long term.

Areas for Action

Beyond asking guiding questions, AECF should also choose a few strategic areas for action. Following are some possibilities:

Support the creation of a high-level critical friends group. This group would advise district leaders about how reforms and changes are being perceived in the community and about how to improve communications with community members. Influential teachers, parents, community members, union leaders, and business leaders would regularly meet with district leaders to report suggestions and criticisms. The district would also use this group to develop and announce new initiatives and work to eliminate barriers up front before they needlessly slow down the reform. An important element of this work would be finding ways for the district to support teachers and the union while, at the same time, getting them to be more supportive of the reforms. AECF could create or fund a neutral third party to could convene this group and moderate discussions.

Create a community campaign to publicize the achievement gap and other issues of fairness for poor and minority students. As mentioned in recommendations to the district, much more attention needs to be drawn to the achievement gap and the ***Blueprint***'s attempts to reduce it. AECF could fund a community campaign to make these issues come alive. The achievement gap and other issues of fairness need to be studied and publicized through media, public forums and advocacy (either by a non-profit community group .or a public relations firm). The district needs the support coming from respected outsiders to help convey the message about why the district and community need to change to improve the educational outcomes of poor and minority students.

Fund or partner with other organizations to provide health and social service supports in schools. The elimination of health and social service supports not only angered and upset teachers and parents, it left students without critical supports for health, counseling, and extra assistance. Some would argue that school districts are not the best providers of these services. AECF could broker between the district and health and social service agencies in San Diego to set up programs or storefronts on school campuses that offer students the services they need. Doing so would support teachers and families, further the NT/FD initiative, and help the district find a way out of the bad feelings that have developed since they shifted funds into academic reforms.

Invest in Data Gathering and Make it Accessible to Neighborhood Parents. With so little known or understood about neighborhood schools (let alone the district as a whole) AECF could greatly add to parents' decision-making capacity by investing in organizations that study and analyze school data and that make sure the findings are clear and helpful to parents. The San Diego Dialogue at UCSD is already doing similar work at a district level and have identified a serious need to look much closer at neighborhood schools and share this information with parents and community members, as well as the district. The Center for Parent Involvement in Education hopes to develop an independent parent organization model that will provide an independent activist voice for parents. Its role would be to " shake things up," get involved in decisions before they become policy, and stay involved once they are in place. It would also inform parents about how to support their children in preparing for standardized tests, academics in general, and how to make the most of conferences and meetings. These and other organizations are eager to provide useful information about local schools to parents and the community in general. AECF could invest in on-the-ground organizations

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such as these that are already thinking about these issues. These would be funds well spent.

Support and Start New Schools. There is a serious need for new schooling options in AECF's San Diego neighborhoods, especially for middle and high schools - the schools in these neighborhoods are generally low performing and overcrowded. To help provide more options, the foundation could focus its efforts on supporting neighborhood and church-based organizations interested in opening new charter schools.

39

APPENDIX C: OTHER AREAS FOR FUNDERS TO INVESTIGATE

Before conducting an Exploratory Case Study, a funder might want to consider the following:

Start with an idea of what to fund

Most gifts are the outcome of a common process. Foundations conduct research into their ideas for what would improve education. They coalesce around particular ideas that they want to support, develop a strategy for how to make it happen and announce their intentions to fund an initiative. Often, the foundation issues a Request for Proposal (RFP) in which they list their criteria for selection and hope that serious prospects will be interested in applying. The right RFP is a crucial place to begin to understand how the initiative is going work and what it will take to make that happen. Asking for the right information in the RFP will make choosing the grantees a much more educated process.

Not all foundations issue RFPs. Sometimes funders seek out a potential grantee and ask them to apply. Regardless of how grantees come to the top of the list, the next step for the foundation should be a formal process to get to know the prospective recipient.

Conduct formal research

Much of this information is easily gathered and quick to sort through.

Mission: Does it fit with the initiative and the mission of the funder?

History: What issues have troubled the organization? What have they tried and done well and what do they struggle with?

Goals: What is the organization trying to do?

Strategies: How are they going about trying to achieve their goals? Are the strategies plausible? What impact have transitions in leadership had on the district?

Assets: What makes now a good time for change?

Challenges: What threatens the reforms?

Collect data

The foundation should collect hard data to discern the health and needs of the potential grantee.

Performance data: several years' worth of school-by-school data, disaggregated by race is a good way to determine what is currently going on in the organization.

Budget: how is the budget spent? Is it in deficit, if so, for how many years? If it has been growing, what efforts have been supported by their growing budget?

Staffing: How difficult is it for the organization to fill its vacancies – at all levels?

Areas of greatest need: An independent assessment of what the organization is in most need of will help to determine if the initiative is right for this organization, or whether it is premature or a diversion.

Other data: what kind of data does the district currently collect related to the funded effort? Do they have capacity in the area of the funded effort?

Conduct informal research

Subjective accounts of the potential recipient can help the funder know if this is a good fit.

Other funders: Conversations with other funders who have worked with this organization would be valuable. What was it like to work with this organization? What was the outcome of their initiatives, if concluded? Were they responsive?

Independent researchers: Talking to independent researchers who have studied the organization and know some of its

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strengths and weaknesses would also be useful.

District leaders: Other conversations might help answer questions such as: What is the reputation of the leader? How stable is the leadership? Are there strong top staffers? Is this an organization capable of undertaking serious change?

Seek understanding and agreement of indicators up front

An upfront understanding between both parties is very important. What is the foundation hoping to see happen? What is the organization interested in working on? And which indicators will be used to measure progress? The relationship of these issues might be the defining factor as to whether the initiative will succeed.

It is possible that the organization will not be able to muster the will to reform. For example, a foundation may decide that their goal is to improve teacher quality. At the outset, a district might agree, and propose improved professional development and more aggressive recruitment. Often, this would be the basis to begin a funding relationship. However, if the foundation went further and discussed with the district how they would want to measure whether these initiatives were having any effect, they might come to an impasse. The district would need to collect some baseline data on teacher quality, something they might not have been doing. The district might decide that for political reasons they would not want to take this on. This particular district might feel that collecting data on each teacher would be dangerous; the union might oppose, principals might want to use it for hiring decisions, parents might demand to see it. If the district backed away from this, the success of the initiative would never be known.

Agreeing on indicators up front and making all the data available to both parties is crucial. The former hypothetical district would not be a good place for this foundation to invest. However, another district might readily agree to collect that data, both for their own uses and for the measure of effect of the initiative. Or another foundation might really want to work with the first district and might not be so wedded to working on teacher quality. They could work with the district to uncover an issue and indicator that the district would be willing to work on. Addressing the full-agreement issues before investing is extremely important. Agreeing on the indicators and making all data available to both parties serves the evaluative purpose, but also impacts the reform effort. Having regular data collection and clear targets enables the district to focus its efforts, increasing the potential magnitude of the reform's effect.[29]

29. Schmoker, Mike. **Results: the Key to Continuous School Improvement**. (2nd Edition, ASCD 2000.)

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